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ABSTRACT

This document describes a Navajo Indian program for making Navajo education more responsive to Native American cultural and educational needs. A survey of existing literature examines American Indian students' historical struggle between cultural identity and Anglo-American assimilation. As Navajo children may lack the schema for traditionally defined educational success and competition, schools might reexamine their customary teaching methods. The Greasewood Toyei Consolidated School began emphasizing bicultural education by weaving Navajo culture into the regular curriculum. Teachers were empowered to create their own culturally relevant study programs as part of a schoolwide curriculum reassessment. Student-testing and discipline policies were reevaluated. Teachers and assistants attended language workshops that exposed them to the Whole Language approach, a holistic learning method. An evaluation committee determined that the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) were inappropriate for Navajo students, and suggested that other achievement measurements be used. Surveys indicated growing use and popularity among teachers and students of the Whole Language approach, prompting additional training and curriculum changes. Greasewood staff developed a school philosophy encouraging further integration of Navajo culture into the curriculum, parental involvement, and the use of the Whole Language approach. As a result, the staff developed an entire new curriculum that balances Indian cultural requirements with state and CTBS testing standards. The document describes further curriculum revision procedures and summarizes new educational objectives for helping Navajo children achieve the balance that is one of the basic tenets of Navajo philosophy. (TES)

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Navajo Culture: A Bridge to the Rest of the World

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Navajo Culture: A Bridge to the Rest of the World

The education of American Indians has long been a subject of controversy. Historically, it was a means of divesting Indians of their land through treaties promising education in return (Schleife, 1987). Education was also used as a means of spreading Christianity and Western culture to the Indians. In 1882, missionary boarding schools were provided on the Navajo Reservation. These were supplemented in 1887 by boarding schools under the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Tonigan, 1974). The primary intent of early Indian education was assimilation. Neither Indian language, culture nor history were taught (Schleife, 1987). In 1973, Howard Gorman (cited in Tonigan, 1974, p. 55), a respected Navajo leader, stated that Navajo education was "something that had as its major objective the destruction of Navajo language and Navajo culture." Even current history books give short shrift to the role of the original Americans. If mentioned, Native Americans are generally portrayed in a stereotypical fashion, virtually ignoring historical facts (Schleife, 1987; textbooks in alphabetical order: Allen; Debolt; Debolt, 1978; Branson, 1982).

As early as 1928, the findings of a comprehensive probe of programs for Native Americans were detailed in the

Merriam report (cited in Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, 1969). It was recognized that traditional public school curricula and methodology did not suffice. By the practice of removing children from their families and placing them in boarding schools, the Indian family structure was being destroyed, thus ensuring that a generation of Indian children was being raised in ignorance of their cultural heritage. In 1969, the Kennedy Report (cited in Fuchs & Havighurst, 1973) also wrote of the deleterious effects of assimilation on Indian children. The report specified the conflict posed for the Indian child in the choices between individual identity and education; absenteeism, high dropout rate, negative self-image, and low achievement were factors related to this conflict. In a study of Alaska Natives, it was found that many young people perceived that education is equated with estrangement from their culture (Schleife, 1987). Kirk (1989, p. 22) calls this the dilemma of ethnic identity. She describes one student as "struggling with her identity, not feeling as 'Indian' as some of the students. . . but still being considered Indian by her family."

A study by Eberhard (1989) examined Native American dropout rates. He found that while Navajo pupils dropped out less than students from other tribes (Sioux, Zuni, Hopi, and others), they still had a significantly higher dropout rate than Anglos. The schools with the highest dropout

rates were found to have the lowest cultural identity. The pupils and parents complained that those schools were insensitive to tribal traditions. Gilliland (1986), John (1972) and Heath (1982), also suggest that school faculty lack knowledge about the native culture which results in cultural discontinuity between the home and school. They hypothesize that this may be linked to poor academic achievement in Indian students. Deyhle (1986, p. 365) specifically noted "participant structures, questioning styles, social organization, the physical features of the classrooms, and the absence of contextually relevant materials" as contributing factors in cultural discontinuity.

Deyhle's (1986) research on early learning of Navajos suggests that learning begins with schema about certain concepts to which the child adds over time. She found that Navajo children may lack schema for such things as success in school, competition, etc., yet traditional teaching methods and curricula are developed around the basic assumption that the children do have these schema upon matriculation. If this is indeed the case, then there is a conflict between what the Navajo child brings to school on the first day and what the school requires of him/her. The question is: should the schools change or should the child change? It is apparent that the latter has been expected by educators in the past, yet obviously this expectation has

not met with success. Eberhard (1989) suggests that schools need to reexamine what have become customary methods, particularly the competitive environment and the enforced passivity of the learner.

In Arizona today, these issues continue to need attention. With 20 tribal governments and approximately 35 percent of the Federal Indian education system located there, adaptation of the educational system is crucial if the educational needs of Native Americans are to be met (Schleife, 1987). Anderson (1976) reports that Native Americans are troubled about the quality and relevancy of their children's education. There is a desire for education that will incorporate, rather than ignore, their values.

This seems rather straightforward, yet for many teachers, Native American as well as Anglo, it presents a dilemma: should Native American children be taught their own cultural heritage or should assimilation be emphasized to assure acquisition of skills necessary for adequate functioning in Anglo society? For most teachers at Greasewood Toyei Consolidated School, these goals are not seen as mutually exclusive. Developmentally, it is necessary that teaching begin with the existing schemata the child has and build on those. The Arizona Department of Education: Indian Education Unit (1987, p. 40) maintains that "teaching strategies that build on, and actively use the child's native language can actually accelerate

development in the second language." Our basic premise is that this is true for culture as well. Just as a child can be proficient in two languages, we suggest that a child can be truly bicultural. A child may recognize the uniqueness of being Indian while appreciating being an integral component in the composition of a global society.

By acknowledging the native culture, teachers may demonstrate respect for and acceptance of their students. Barbara Shin (cited in Schleife, 1987, p. 16) states that in a culturally fair school "ethnic heritage is acknowledged as a source of pride in self. It is also acknowledged as a source of information. It contributes to the whole." Indeed, knowledge of this heritage can be made to work for the teacher as Dagnal-Myron (1989, p.34) explains that "a reservation is a repository of time tested and valuable beliefs and practices where there is no division between spiritual and 'practical' or 'earthly' concerns."

It is our goal at Greasewood to weave the Navajo culture into the regular school curriculum rather than maintain it as a supplementary program. This work must begin with empowered teachers. Site-based management to empower teachers is recommended by Eberhard (1989). In order for the school-wide curriculum to be congruent with the goals as stated, it must be developed on-site. This enables the teachers to create a program of studies for the students which will have a developmental base and be

culturally relevant to the students (Brandt, 1986; Livingston, Castle, & Nations, 1989).

Curriculum first became a question of worth for us when Greasewood school was selected as a pilot school for the National Education Association Mastery in Learning Project in 1984. The project was designed to develop school renewal through teacher empowerment. In one of the first exercises to focus the direction of the Greasewood project, staff members considered two important questions: first, what is so awful about this school that it must be changed tomorrow? and second, what is so wonderful about this school that is should never be changed?

Staff members considered these questions as individuals, next in pairs, and then in small groups. Finally the entire staff met to discuss the results of the focusing exercise: the curriculum and student discipline policies must be changed tomorrow; the sense of community at Greasewood and of Greasewood as a community school must never change.

As a first step, the Steering Committee decided to examine the existing curriculum. There wasn't one. Bits and pieces of curriculum, unearthed from the backs of dusty file cabinets, were examined. They had little to do with the texts and methods currently used at the school. The next questions of worth arose naturally from this process: What is being taught? What should be taught?

The answers revealed conflicts. Textbooks had been ordered to match the objectives of the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTB/McGraw Hill, 1981). Student promotion and retention decisions were based primarily on the test. Teachers were evaluated for salary increments on the percentage of students who made at least 6 months to a year's growth on the test from fall to spring each year. However, teachers felt that the test did not seem to measure what students knew and could do. Students who tested two years below grade level could read and discuss books written at grade level. A committee was formed to evaluate the CTBS test as a measurement for Navajo children and its effect on the curriculum in 1985. This committee collected and reviewed the latest research on testing and measurement with the help of the NEA/MILP office in Washington, D.C.

At the same time, teachers and assistants had attended Whole Language workshops and been exposed to the idea that children learn holistically and not skill by skill. The methods from the workshop seemed appropriate to the students and most importantly, they seemed to be working. The Whole Language committee was formed in 1985 to evaluate these new methods and how they might affect the curriculum.

The testing committee, through analyzing the research obtained from NEA, discovered that the CTBS test was inappropriate for Navajo students. For example, the first sample item on the vocabulary section (CTB/McGraw Hill,

1981, p. 1) for 7th and 8th grades was "The fishing boat slowly pulled in and tied up at the _____." Answer: "wharf". Obviously, this is a word children from a desert region would have little reason to use or know. The testing committee wrote an evaluation of the CTBS test and sent it to the Fort Defiance Agency Superintendent during the fall of 1986. Members requested that the CTBS test be discontinued and suggested other measures of student progress to use. Up to this time, student promotion and retention policies had primarily been based on CTBS measured progress. In 1986, Greasewood adopted the use of the Brigance Diagnostic Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills (Brigance, 1983) along with teacher evaluation as alternative measures of student progress for promotion/retention evaluations as a result of this committee's work. The CTBS test is still currently in use at Greasewood and at other BIA schools across the Navajo Reservation. Interestingly enough, by Agency mandate, this year a performance-based evaluation form is being used in grades K-1 in place of the CTBS for the first time.

During the fall of 1986, the Whole Language committee surveyed teachers to find out what Whole Language methods were being used for what percentage of class time, and to evaluate the texts in use. Approximately one third of the teachers used Whole Language methods (journals, writing process, literature studies, reading aloud, music and

movement, manipulative math instruction) for 50 percent of class time; one third used them (journals, writing process, some literature studies) for 30 percent of instructional time; and one third used them 10 percent of the time (journals) or did not use the methods at all.

Next, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students were surveyed in order to establish their preference between Whole Language methods (literature studies and writing process) currently in use in the junior high and traditional methods (basal readers and grammar workbooks) they had experienced in earlier grades. Seventy percent of the students preferred literature studies and writing process and did not want to return to using basal readers and grammar books. The results of these surveys were a major factor in the administration's decision to continue holding summer seminars in Whole Language and to hire consultants to work with the staff during the school year.

As discussions continued in the Whole Language and steering committees, new questions of worth arose. Whole Language theory posits that children learn language by using it to talk, write, and read first about what they know. Children create schemas and constructs of meaning, then expand and adapt them as they gain new knowledge and experiences (Smith, 1975). But the textbooks in use at Greasewood had little to do with what Navajo children experience and know when they come to school. Social

studies texts mention Native Americans only briefly (Branson, 1982; Allen; Debolt & Debolt, 1978); basal reader stories set in city contexts did not connect easily to the lives of children brought up in hogans (Rosenbaum; Shaw; Tolbert; Weiss, 1983).

All the teachers surveyed agreed that the texts currently in use were inadequate and that the children did not understand them without a lot of explanation. Might this not be a large factor in the discipline problems of the school? If everything school asks students to learn is completely outside of their experiential background, then students might feel first, that they themselves were judged as unimportant and not worth learning about and second, that school had little relevance or worth to them. To the committee, these attitudes seemed to be reflected in the low achievement, absenteeism and discipline problems of Greasewood students and by the high percentage of students (approximately 40 percent) who did not go on to or did not finish high school after leaving Greasewood.

The Whole Language committee felt that Whole Language would better address the educational needs of Greasewood students for several reasons. This approach is a holistic philosophy of education compatible with the holistic outlook of Navajo philosophy. Further, the focus of valuing what children already know and connecting it to new knowledge appeared to be the best way to construct a bridge between

the world of the CTBS test and the world of the children. Perhaps most importantly, it would allow the children to become aware of their own worth. As Goodman (1986, pp. 9-10) states:

> Schools should build on the language development children have attained before they start school, and on experiences they have outside of school. . . Uninteresting irrelevant exercises are particularly tough on minority children who are constantly being reminded of the distance between their world and the school world. It's hard to motivate kids when the stuff they are asked to read and write, hear and say has no relation to who they are, what they think, and what they do.

To the committee, this meant that Navajo language and culture must be integrated with the curriculum.

Thus the Bilingual/Bicultural committee was formed. This committee collected curriculum materials and information from other schools on the reservation that were implementing bilingual education programs of various kinds. Committee members also visited schools in the fall of 1986 to see them in action and to find out how those schools had developed programs. Resource materials were ordered and made available for teachers to use in introducing and reinforcing learning by connecting it to Navajo traditions and beliefs. The committee worked to evaluate the best way

to approach bilingual/bicultural education at Greasewood, and considered the advisability of pull-out classes in language and culture versus the all Navajo language approach used at Rough Rock Demonstration School. Neither extreme seemed satisfactory: Greasewood would have to develop its own program in its own way.

By the end of the fall semester, Greasewood staff members had a strong sense of the direction the curriculum should take, but were unsure about how to put it together. The school's NEA/MILP consultant provided the tools by setting up a course in curriculum development through NAU to be taught at Greasewood school. NEA/MILP monies and school staff development monies were used to pay for 3 hours of graduate credit for each staff member who participated in writing the curriculum. The course instructor, Dr. Paul J. Staskey of the Center for Excellence in Education at Northern Arizona University, came out to Greasewood and met with the Whole Language and Bicultural/Bilingual committees to design a course so that the staff could develop and write the curriculum. The Whole Language and Bicultural/Bilingual committees united to form a curriculum committee to coordinate the on-going progress of the project. The administration agreed to provide time for the entire staff to meet with Dr. Staskey during the school day several times throughout the spring semester. Course objectives were

developed from the teacher-written school philosophy and included:

1. Encourage the integration of Native culture, language, traditions and values in the learning environment of the school.

2. Utilize traditional beliefs as well as modern concepts to promote responsible attitudes and actions concerning our environment.

3. Prepare each student for successful transition into adulthood by teaching life skills and knowledge as well as the responsibilities of individual freedom.

4. Provide for maximum community and parental involvement in school activities through increased cooperation and communication among all concerned individuals.

5. Encourage the integration of Whole Language throughout the entire curriculum.

Greasewood staff members met in subject area committees to work through the steps of developing a curriculum. Representatives from the Whole Language committee worked on each subject area committee. First, educational goals and objectives were identified for each subject area. These included the Arizona Essential Skills (Arizona Dept. of Education, 1986), CTBS (CTB/McGraw Hill, 1981), and Brigance (Brigance 1983) goals, as well as objectives developed by local Navajo teachers. Next, the content for each area was

selected and organized. Learning activities and culturally appropriate teaching methods were outlined for each subject area. A variety of methods were developed for the evaluation of student outcomes. Finally, the entire staff met by subject area to assure continuity from grade to grade.

Throughout the course, staff members considered questions of worth: What is the nature of the "good life", and what is the role of education in its realization? What knowledge is worth knowing? Should schools teach youth to fit into the existing social order or to reconstruct society? The staff felt that each person must decide for himself what the "good life" is, and that the role of education was to provide the tools for making that decision. Given the rapid obsolescence of factual knowledge and the information explosion in the world today, the staff decided to emphasize enduring skills such as decision making, problem solving, reflective and critical thinking, valuing, concept forming, and information processing. The existing social order is changing, both on the reservation and in the rest of the world, and Greasewood students must be able to participate actively in that change. The best way to prepare children for the future is to teach children how to do things and help them clarify how they feel and what they value.

Navajo culture

By the end of the course, Greasewood had a curriculum that supported and respected the community of the school and also created a bridge to the demands of state requirements and CTBS objectives. Thanks to NEA/MILP funding, it was printed by the fall of 1987. In addition, a plan for evaluating and revising the curriculum on a yearly basis was developed to coordinate with Bureau of Indian Affairs textbook ordering policies. Accordingly, during school year 1987-88, the math committee met to review and revise the math curriculum, to include Navajo vocabulary for counting and calculation, to examine recent developments in teaching methods and to order new math textbooks. The science committee met during school year 1988-89. New science texts and Navajo science education materials have been ordered and the curriculum is in the process of being revised to include such things as the traditional uses of local plants and respect for cultural beliefs. For example, students can read about snakes, but handling them or observing them in the classroom would be unacceptable to traditional views. This year the social studies curriculum is up for review, and new texts must be ordered.

In December, the MILP Steering Committee became involved in a curriculum research project being conducted on a computer network sponsored by IBM and NEA. Currently, the committee is surveying staff members to assess the need for revision in each subject area. The school is also beginning

the process of surveying students, parents, the school board and community members to enlist their help in assessing the curriculum. Future plans for evaluation include: 1) an analysis of CTBS and Brigance test scores from the past three years to determine the effectiveness of the curriculum in regard to standardized test performance, 2) a study to determine a possible correlation between absenteeism and student attitudes, and 3) a survey of graduates from the past three years to assess any changes in the dropout rate of Greasewood students in high school and to discover if there is any correlation with the change in curriculum.

We believe that education has multiple goals: the teaching of facts, the teaching of processes, and the teaching of self worth. A child who is assimilated into another culture but has no feeling of self-worth will function well in neither culture. Lillie Pete, one of the authors, characterizes this as follows:

> The Navajos have traveled a long happy road interacting with one native language. The early education system severed the Navajo's way of life by forcefully separating the children from parents and alienating them from their own culture. From this point in time, the separation began: on one side the new 'remolded' Indian, and on the other the traditional Navajo. As time went, on the children of the 'remolded' Indian

> became the 'un-Indian.' They don't speak their own language, they don't know their culture, they have no self identity, and they don't wholly fit into either side. They can't communicate with their grandparents, who feel a great sense of loss. The people are now traveling two separate roads, each side longing for the other. Since the education system was the cause of the dilemma, it ought to be the system to correct the mistake by creating the balance of learning.

To develop self-worth, a child must have a sense of identity. We begin by teaching them of their history to develop a sense of identity and self pride which is compatible with Navajo values: thinking of one's self in a positive way. To walk in beauty, peace, and harmony - Hozhoogo naashaadoo - is the Navajo goal of life. One of the basic tenets of Navajo philosophy is that, in order to walk in beauty, one must maintain a balance. That balance is created by meeting the four basic needs of human life: physical, spiritual, social-emotional and intellectual. Teachers must first help the children understand and value themselves. From that vantage point, teachers must help children make the connections to Anglo culture, creating a bridge to the rest of the world. Only then can the children maintain a sense of balance and continue to walk in beauty. Navajos view the world holistically: so too, must the teachers and the school.

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